Issue 5
Summer 2017

Newsletter

Welcome to the issue of the Surrey Dormouse Group Newsletter!

We hope you're enjoying the good weather, and have seen plenty of dormice this spring. This issue has a particular focus on Surrey dormouse data, with a round-up of the results from across our sites in 2016, and a look further back in time, to see how dormice have fared since 1993. We've also got an update on our training scheme, opportunities to get involved with telling the public about dormice and their conservation, and updates from some of our sites.

In this issue:

- Surrey's dormice in 2016 *page 2*
- Training for a licence with SDG *page 3*
- Long-term trends in dormice numbers in Surrey *page 4*
- SDG events *page 6*
- Highlights from around our sites *page 6*

You just never know what you're going to find in a dormouse box...

Julie Mottishaw recounts an unusual encounter on a box check

During our June box checks at Chilworth we came across a strange looking nest. The previous month the box had been empty, but now it was full to the brim of loose bits and pieces: moss, bits of leaves, bits of bark and a couple of opened hazel nuts. Everything was very dry and clean but there was no structure to the nest. It didn't look like a bird's nest, a dormouse nest or a wood mouse nest.

We were curious so took the box off the tree and paced it in the large plastic bag. We slowly removed the contents into the bag, hopeful that there could be a torpid dormouse in there. As we reached the bottom layer we suddenly saw a grey wriggling mass at the bottom of the box. Our first thoughts were that we had some very young wood mice but then we looked more closely and saw they were baby pygmy shrews. We quickly put all the nest contents back in the box and replaced it on the tree. As we removed the duster and stepped back almost immediately an adult pygmy shrew started going in and out of the box, then we realised two adults were going in and out, almost non-stop. We stood and watched them for about 15 minutes, feeling very relieved that our disturbance didn't seemed to have had a bad impact on the family.

We carried on with the box check and when we'd finished we had to go pass the box to leave the site. We again stood for quite a while, watching the box at a distance, and were pleased to see both adults continuing their trips in and out of the box, presumably bringing in food for their young. They were working so hard, just as they must have done to bring in so much nesting material!

It's something I've never seen before, or heard of, I've only ever seen individual adult pygmy shrews in boxes, so it was quite magical and a privilege to see that lovely family.

Thanks to Marilyn Holmested for the photograph, Marilyn also took a video of the adults going in and out of the box.

Pygmy shrew (photo courtesy of Marilyn Holmested)

Surrey's dormice in 2016

Annabelle South looks at the 2016 data from NDMP sites in Surrey to see how the county's dormice fared

27 sites monitored

199 visits

9284 boxes checked

777 dormice found

2 median number of dormice per 50 boxes

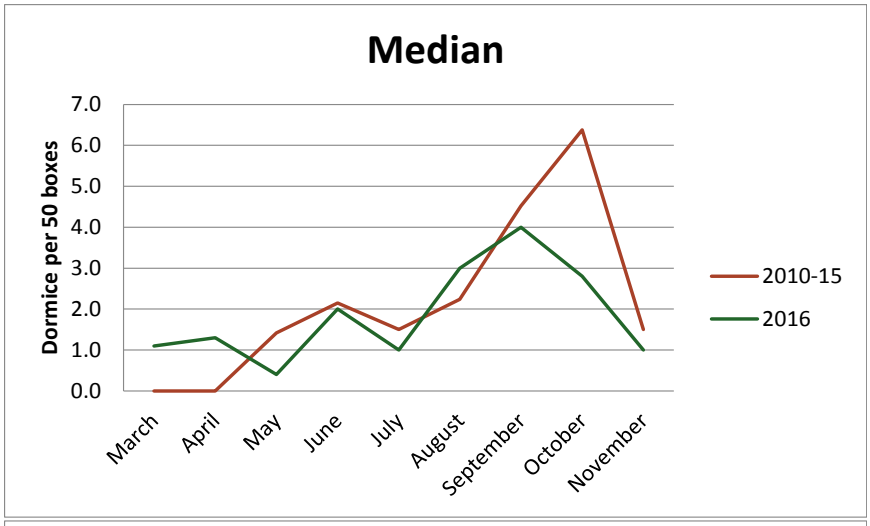
4 mean number of dormice per 50 boxes

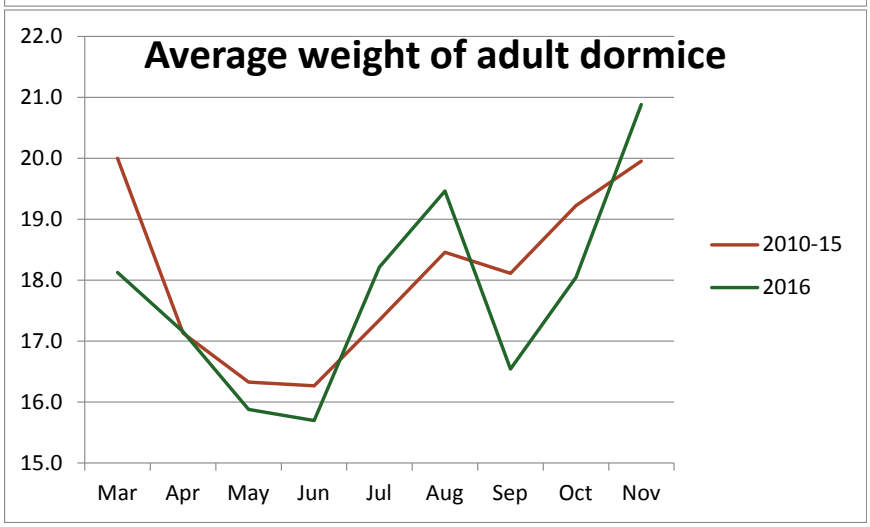
1 in 3 visits without any dormice

48 highest number of dormice per 50 boxes

2016 got off to a good start, with 12 dormice seen in March and 28 in April (an average of just over 1 per 50 boxes) – much higher than usual, perhaps because of the mild winter. However, May was much quieter than usual for most sites. After that, things were pretty similar to the previous six years for June to September. We saw far fewer dormice than average in October (less than half compared to previous years).

The average weight of adult dormice started quite a bit lower than previous years, but by July had exceeded it, until a substantial dip in September. Those dormice who were found in boxes in November were heavier than the average for previous years.





Always do what's best for the dormouse
(or Training for a Licence with SDG)

Julie Mottishaw

When SDG started, in 2009, Natural England requirements for people applying for a dormouse handling licence were quite narrow. You needed to attend a Dormouse Ecology Training course and provide two references from people who knew you and had seen you handle dormice.

As SDG got established our thoughts on gaining a licence developed: it should be about more than handling dormice; people should see all stages of the dormouse lifecycle; be able to deal with other box occupants; know how to install a new box; know how to record the data etc. Gaining this experience can take a long time, typically 2 or 3 years. So SDG created a Training Scheme, our objective was to be known as a group who trained people to a very high standard. Each trainee had a mentor, there was a Training Log and we successfully trained more than a dozen people.

At the same time PTES were thinking along similar lines, working with Natural England to develop the scheme they have today. They used aspects from our scheme and others, like the one in Kent. When it was in place we decided to go with the new scheme and discontinue ours.

But now we've decided to put a bit more structure around training again so we can maintain our high standards. We will have named trainees, assigned to a mentor, using an updated version of our old Training Log, which has a few extra requirements, alongside the PTES/NE one. SDG trainees are given priority for any dormouse handling on a check and we will only provide references for our named trainees.

Our first group of 24 trainees have been confirmed, from now on it will be a rolling process, a new trainee will be accepted as others gain their licences and mentors have the capacity to take on someone else.

If you are interested in being an SDG trainee we recommend that you carry out box checks on a regular basis, using the PTES/NE Training Log to record everything. At the same time, talk to the site leaders who are mentors and see if any of them would be prepared to take you on as a trainee when they have the capacity to do so.

Newly accepted trainees will have their previous experience, from their PTES/NE Training Log, carried over to the SDG Training Log; there is no concept or penalty of 'starting again'.

Licence holders will continue to sign off any skills or experience on the PTES/NE Training Log for non-trainees.

On a personal note, being a licence holder is so much more than ticking off boxes on a Training Log, or going through the motions of collecting data. It's about having the welfare of these precious mammals as the focus for all you do. Treating them with the utmost care and respect, which sometimes means not collecting data because you suspect the adult that has just dived under the nest in July may have babies in the nest she isn't prepared to leave, so put the box back and minimise any disturbance. We will be successful if we impart this approach and consideration into your training – always do what's best for the dormouse!

(photo courtesy of Annabelle South)

Long-term trends in dormice numbers in Surrey

The State of Britain's Dormice 2016 report painted a gloomy picture of the size of the dormouse population in Britain. Annabelle South looked at long-term data from Surrey to see if we're observing similar declines.

Introduction

Last autumn the PTES published a report into The State of Britain's Dormice. This looked at data from the National Dormouse Monitoring Programme from 1993 to 2015, assessing long-term trends in population. The headline findings made for grim reading for dormice fans: counts have fallen by 38% since 2000. I looked at data from Surrey to see if our observations match the national picture.

Methods

The PTES shared data from box checks in Surrey that had been submitted to the NDMP. This included all NDMP sites in the county, so includes a few that aren't monitored by SDG.

I then identified the peak counts of adult dormice per 50 boxes in either May or June for each site for every year. The highest count from site visits in either May or June is taken as an indication of the size of the pre-breeding (adult) population, and avoids this year's young being misclassified as adults. The individual peak counts were plotted in a scatter chart. The mean average peak count for each year was also calculated, and plotted in a line chart.

For sites with more than five years of data, I calculated the average peak count for the first three years of monitoring, and compared this to the average for the most recent two years of monitoring, to see if the dormouse population had risen, fallen or remained stable. These were plotted on a map of Surrey (with only approximate locations).

Results

The data I received went back to 1993 (Vann Lake). However, there was relatively little data for the first 15 years, as few sites were being monitored. We therefore need to be careful not to over-interpret data.

Figure 1

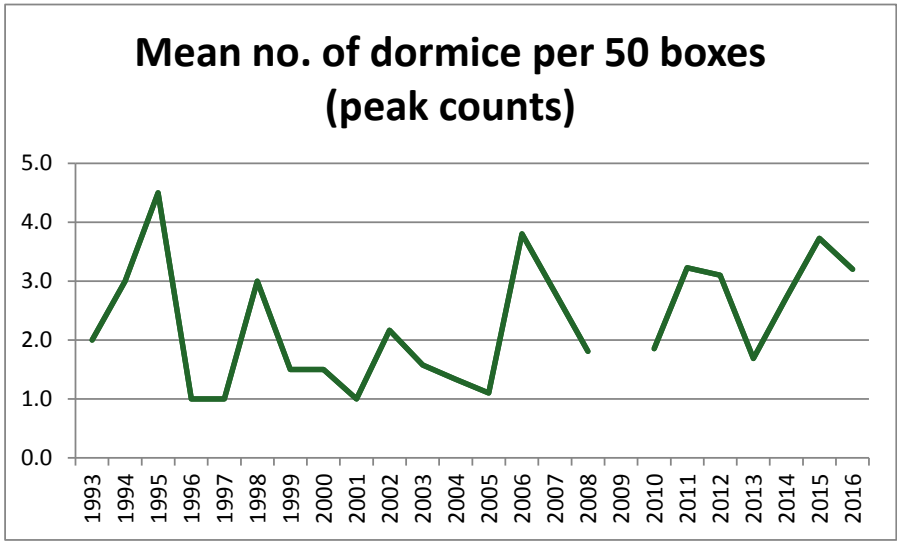
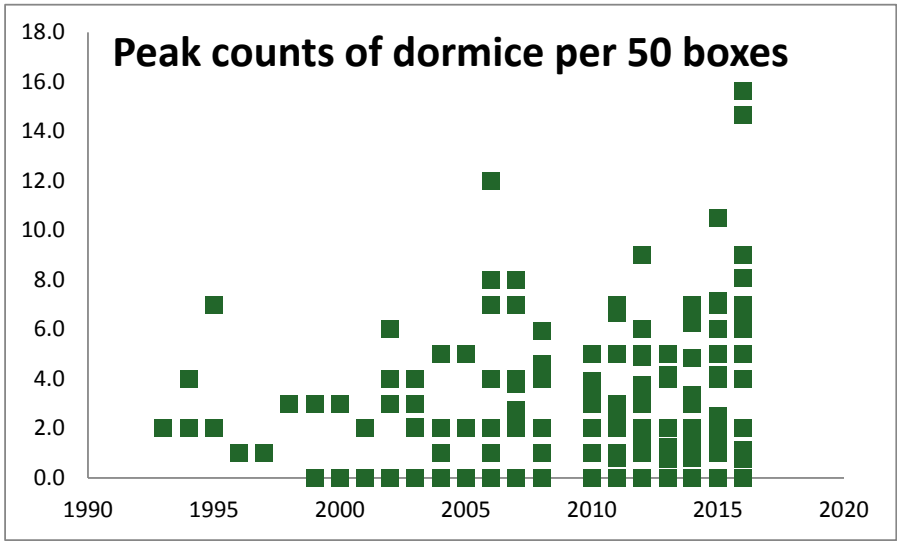


Figure 2



As can be seen from Figure 1, average peak counts have fluctuated over the years, but there doesn't seem to have been a marked decline over this period. Figure 2, showing the peak counts from each site suggests there may even have been a slight improvement. However, when looking at this data we need to bear in mind that the mix of sites has changed over the period, with more (and perhaps better) sites being added over the period.

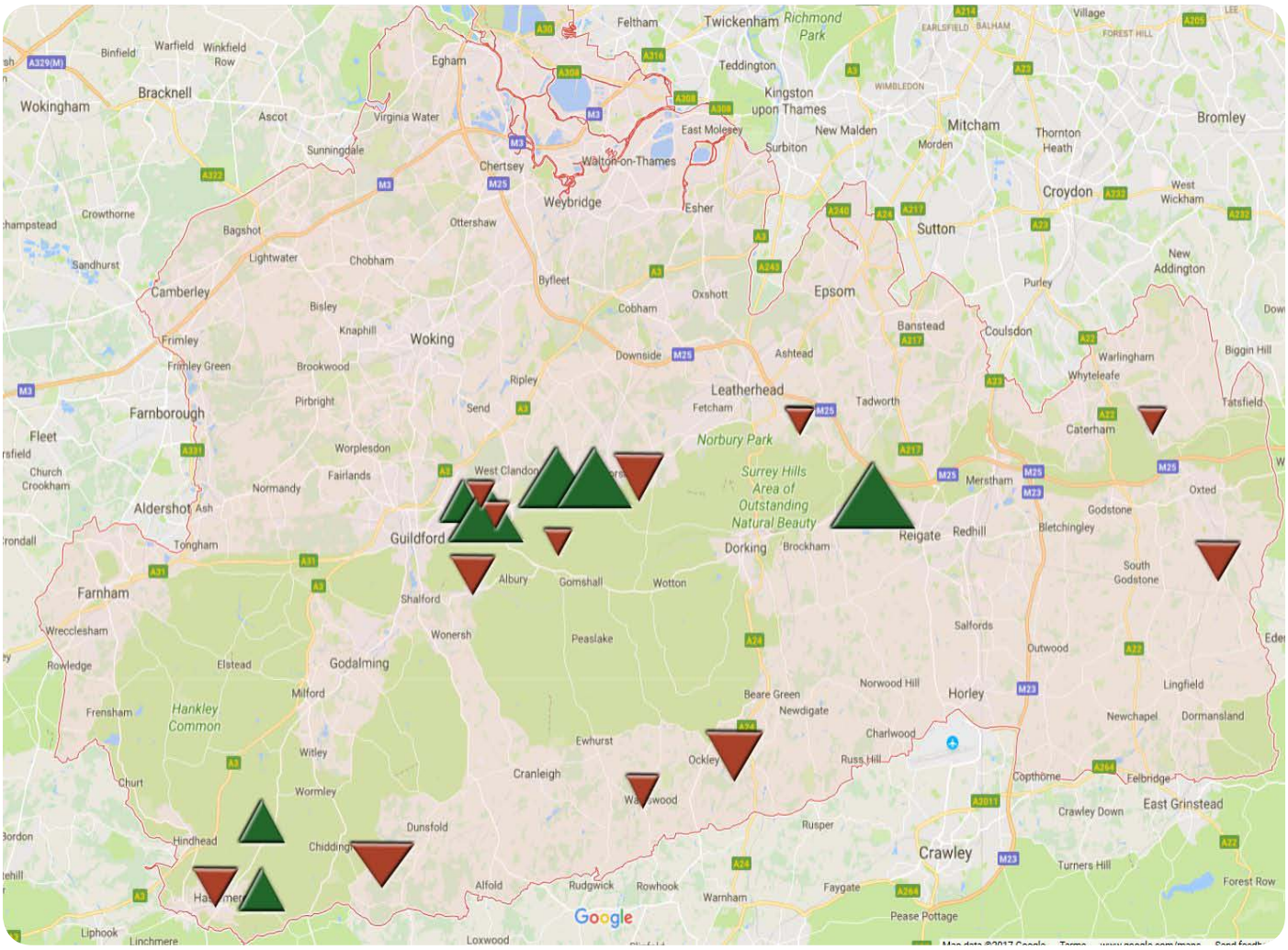
Figure 3 gives an approximate representation of which sites (that have been monitored for at least five years) have seen improvements, and which ones declines, during the time they have been monitored. The green triangles represent increases in peak counts, while the orange triangles represent decreases. The size of the triangle is a rough representative of the size of the change, with larger triangles representing bigger increases or decreases. (NB. this is not to an exact scale, and the geographic location is only approximate).

As Figure 3 shows, there's quite a bit of variety in changes in dormouse populations between sites. There were large or moderate declines in 6 sites, and large or moderate increases in 7 sites. There doesn't seem to be a clear geographical pattern for these changes.

Conclusions

These data suggest that the picture for dormice in Surrey in recent years may not be as bleak as that of Britain overall. However, the sparsity of data for the first 15 years of this data set means we cannot be sure of this. While overall there does not seem to have been a decline in Surrey, some sites have experienced marked declines, and the seeming overall improvement may be due, at least in part, to better sites being added to the NDMP in recent years. Average peak counts across sites have rarely exceeded 3 dormice per 50 boxes, so we cannot afford to be complacent.

Figure 3: Map of Surrey showing trends in peak counts in sites with >5 years of data
(green triangles = increase, orange triangles = decrease, size of triangle indicates approximate size of change in peak counts)



SDG events

SDG are attending events around the county this year, educating people about dormice. We've already done several events, but there are still several events coming up:

- NT Swan Barn Farm (29 July, 10.00-16.00, Haslemere)
- Rustic Sunday (30 July, 10.00-17.00, Farnham)
- River Wey Festival (23 September, time TBC, Guildford)

Thanks to all the volunteers who have helped at events this year already. If you'd like to get involved with any events listed above, email: **info@surreydormousegroup.org.uk**

Useful links

- Surrey Dormouse Group
- Surrey Dormouse Group Facebook group
- PTES training information
- Dormouse monitor
- Wildwood
- British Wildlife Centre

Contact us

info@surreydormousegroup.org.uk

Highlights from around our sites

Roughs 2

We have found our first dormouse since setting up the site last June!

Norbury Park

After a very slow start to 2016, with one dormouse found in March and then nothing until August, numbers increased in the later part of the season with a peak of 12 dormice on September's check, 8 of which were squeezed into one box with not a lot of room to spare!

2017 started on a more positive note with dormice found in April, May and June so far as well as the usual blue tit squatters. We had a number of large branches come down over the winter which is letting more light in than last year in one area in particular, so we will see if that has any effect on dormouse numbers using the boxes this season.

We have been fur clipping since the middle of last year but so far have only had one clipped dormouse reappear on a subsequent check – a good sign in some ways as it means we have more dormice around than we would know about otherwise but it would be good to find the same animals month after month so we can track their movements around the site.

First dormouse found at Roughs 2 (photo by Jess Smith)

And finally…

As ever, we'd love to hear what you think of the SDG newsletter, and even better, for you to get involved in the next issue. If you have any photos for the next issue, or would like to write an article, or suggest something we should cover, please email **info@surreydormousegroup.org.uk**

Thanks to everyone who has contributed to this newsletter.